



Suicide Prevention
Australia

Public consultation to inform Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide

May 2021



Phone 02 9262 1130
admin@suicidepreventionaust.org
www.suicidepreventionaust.org
GPO Box 219 Sydney NSW 2001
ABN 64 461 352 676
ACN 164 450 882

Patron: His Excellency General the Honourable
David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)

What are your comments on the proposed themes?

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for suicide prevention, we have over 300 members including the largest, and many of the smallest, suicide prevention and mental health organisations across Australia.

We welcome the opportunity to submit to consultation to inform Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and commend the Commonwealth Government for recognising the need to enhance the health and wellbeing of Australians who serve – and ultimately, save lives.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports the Australian veteran population experience suicide rates 18% higher for ex-serving men than the general population.¹ Suicide is also the leading cause of death for ex-serving men and men in the reserves, as well as being the second highest cause of death for serving men.²

Based on consultation with our key members and other stakeholders, we make the following comments on the proposed themes for your consideration:

Learning from survivors

We urge the Royal Commission to look not only to deaths by suicide or to those bereaved by suicide, but also to those who have experienced suicidality including experiencing suicidal thoughts and surviving an attempt, in contexts both during service and out of service. It is crucial to examine what factors and supports played a role in preventing suicide from people with lived experience to learn what needs to be done more broadly to support veterans and prevent further deaths by suicide.

Transition out of service into the community

A key focus of the Royal Commission should be on the transition out of service and integration back into the community. We recognise that the Australian Defence Force provide frameworks and supports to ensure positive mental health during service but highlight the fragmentation and at times lack of necessary and appropriately skilled supports upon service exit. A key issue highlighted to us in our consultations is that services and supports are readily accessible in service by undertaking simple chain of command processes. Upon leaving service, many don't possess knowledge of how to access support in the broader community, and experience difficulty navigating the mental health system.

Protective factors

We have heard through our consultations that many protective factors exist within the Australian Defence Force such as a sense of belonging, connection, unity, structure, and peer support. It is when these supports suddenly end, that people become more vulnerable placing them at higher risk. It will be important that the Royal Commission look to those currently in and out of service who have not experienced suicidality to investigate and understand what structures and supports have acted as protective factors for suicide.

Women

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2019. National suicide monitoring of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel: 2019 update, accessed online at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/99c20935-ac59-4a78-88d7-e37b6cd3b969/aihw-phe-222.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports suicide among ex-serving women is higher than suicide rates among the general female population in Australia.³ With research reporting suicide rates among ex-serving Australian Defence Force women to be 115% higher than the Australian general female population in the same ages.⁴ Our consultations highlighted the need for the Royal Commission to consider protective factors and risk factors through a gendered lens to address suicide rates among female veterans.

Vicarious trauma

We are concerned that holding a Royal Commission may pose risks of vicarious trauma. We strongly encourage consideration of implementing strategies to minimise potential vicarious trauma, in particular for media reporting. Mindframe guidelines provide resources and information on reporting about suicide in the media available on their [website](#). We further suggest putting in place specific supports for people with lived experience engaging with the Royal Commission process.

Q2. Are there any other issues the Royal Commission should have regard to?

We suggest the Royal Commission give regard to the following:

- Recommendations of the Productivity Commission Inquiry report – A Better Way to Support Veterans released on 4 July 2019. The Inquiry addressed structural issues in supporting the lifetime wellbeing of veterans which are key in reducing risk factors for suicide.⁵
- Suicide prevention strategies targeted to serving and ex-serving military personnel in countries such as New Zealand, United States, Canada, and United Kingdom.

Q.3. What are your comments on how the Royal Commission should conduct its inquiry?

Adopt a tailored specific individual lens

People in service have different exposures to stress and trauma, and as such experience different training on coping and building resilience. For example, certain units are expected to have a higher trauma workload. Some may be well equipped to cope with trauma whilst in service due to the protective factors available (sense of unity and purpose), and some may not begin experiencing symptoms of suicidality until years later when the structure and support from their unit is no longer available. Differences further occur among those who voluntarily leave service as opposed to those who

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2018). Causes of death among serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel: 2002–2015. Access online at < <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/veterans/causes-of-death-in-adf-personnel-2002-2015/contents/tableof-contents>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jones, K., Varker, T., Stone, C., Agathos, J., O'Donnell, M., Forbes, D., Lawrence-Wood, E. & Sadler, N. (2020). Defence Force and Veteran suicides: Literature review, Report prepared for the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, *Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health*, Melbourne.

⁵ Productivity Commission. (2019). A better way to support veterans, Inquiry Report, No. 93, 27 June 2019.

do not (e.g., discharged due to medical or other reasons). We suggest the Royal Commission adopt a tailored specific individual lens to understand protective factors and risk factors per unit and cohort.

For information

Suicide Prevention Australia

Policy & Government Relations

policy@suicidepreventionaust.org